

Are You a Dispensationalist?

It is possible that you are a dispensationalist and don't know it. If you're like me, I've been taught the essentials of dispensationalism all my life without knowing exactly what the term itself meant. Hopefully, by the end of this discussion you will have a better understanding of Dispensationalism, and you may be able to determine if you are a dispensationalist.

What is a Dispensation?

The central idea of the word dispensation is that of managing or administering the affairs of a household.¹ A dispensation is NOT a time period. If things stayed the same and never changed, it would never have been associated with a time period. However, since throughout time, circumstances have changed, and therefore, God's instructions have changed, so then a particular dispensation becomes associated with a particular period of time.

The number of dispensations and how they are divided up varies, but a common division is as follows:

1. The dispensation of Innocence. A dispensation that was in effect from the creation to the Fall.
2. The dispensation of Conscience. A dispensation that was in effect from the Fall until Noah.
3. The dispensation of Civil Government. A dispensation that was in effect from Noah until Abraham.
4. The dispensation of Promise or Patriarchal Rule. A dispensation that was in effect from Abraham until the giving of the Law.
5. The dispensation of the Mosaic Law. A dispensation that was in effect from the giving of the Law until the 1st

coming of Christ.

6. The dispensation of Grace. A dispensation that was in effect from the 1st coming of Christ to the 2nd Coming of Christ.

7. The dispensation of the Millennium. A dispensation that will be in effect from the 2nd Coming of Christ until the beginning of the Eternal Order at the end of the 1,000 years.

Some dispensations can be divided up into smaller dispensations, and they can be given different names. However, one thing is clear, there are dispensations and they are governed by different overarching themes.

The Matter of Carryovers

There is also the matter of “Carryovers” during the transition from one dispensation to another. Each dispensation commonly includes:

Certain ordinances that were valid and continue to be valid in the new dispensation. A good example is the command to not eat blood first given to Noah ([Genesis 9:4](#)), then to Moses ([Leviticus 3:17](#)) and was even carried over into the so-called dispensation of Grace at the Council of Jerusalem ([Acts 15:29](#)).

Other regulations that were valid until then are annulled and do not continue into the new dispensation. An example of this is the freedom to eat any meat, which is actually a reversal back to a previous dispensation where God commanded Noah to eat “every moving thing that liveth” ([Genesis 9:3](#)).

New principles not valid before are introduced in the new dispensation. The Mosaic Law is a dramatic illustration of this. A large portion of the Law introduced new principles.

Promises given in one dispensation are carried over and

fulfilled in another dispensation. Many of the promises to the nation of Israel, to Abraham and to David are yet to be fulfilled, but will be fulfilled during the Millennium.

Some things instituted in one dispensation may be elaborated or modified in a later dispensation. An excellent example of this is the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus takes the written laws one step further—not only is it wrong to murder, but if you hate, you have already committed murder in your heart.

In summary: “Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In His household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stage of revelation in the passage of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these different economies constitute the dispensation. The understanding of God’s differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.”²

The Sine Qua Non of Normative/Classical Dispensationalism

According to Dr. Charles Ryrie, there are three Sine Qua Non aspects of Dispensationalism—which means they are aspects that are absolutely indispensable or essential to Dispensationalism. These are characteristics of what is considered Normative or Classical Dispensationalism.

1. The consistent literal or plain interpretation of scripture based on the plenary (inerrant) inspiration of the scriptures using a Historical-Grammatical method of interpretation. The term “literal” is sometimes ironically taken too literally and then made fun of—you don’t really believe God has feathers do you? ([Psalm 91:4](#)). A better term would be understanding scripture in the plain or normal meaning as opposed to allegorizing it. This is taking God’s word at face value—God says what He means, and means what He

says!

A literal interpretation of scripture isn't solely the domain of Dispensationalism, others non-dispensationalist including Covenant Theologians take a large amount of the scripture literally or plainly, but it is the consistent use of a literal hermeneutic that defines Dispensationalism. Not just for historical and doctrinal passages, but for prophetic passages as well. Covenant Theologians allegorize most of prophetic scripture and the promises of the unconditional covenants, especially if it relates to the nation of Israel.

2. The distinctness of Israel and the Church (the Ekklesia of Christ) grows out of a consistent, literal hermeneutic. The church is a separate entity (separate from the nation of Israel) and is made up of Jewish and Gentile believers only.

God has separate purposes, and separate destinies for Israel and the Church. A consistent literal or plain understanding of scripture makes these distinctions.

3. The underlying purpose of God in the world—the glory of God. Although salvation is a primary theme of God's purpose in the world which brings glory to Him, it isn't the sole purpose of God in the world. It is only one of many.

In summary: *"The essence of dispensationalism, then, is the distinction between Israel and the church. This grows out of the dispensationalist's consistent employment of normal or plain or historical-grammatical interpretation, and it reflects an understanding of the basic purpose of God in all His dealings with mankind as that of glorifying Himself through salvation and other purposes as well."*³

Additional Defining Characteristics

Another defining characteristics of Dispensationalism is the literal fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament covenants and prophecy.

Taking these at face value using a literal interpretation leads naturally to the literal fulfillment of the promises given in these covenants. Many of the promises included in these covenants are yet to be fulfilled and are part of Eschatology—end time prophecy that has not occurred as yet.

The 1,000 year reign of Christ in the Millennium will be the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. Everything that God promised to Abraham, to David and to Israel through the prophets will be fulfilled during the Millennial period.

Taking prophecy at face value leads naturally to a literal 1,000 year period where the Messiah will come to earth, set up His kingdom and rule with a rod of iron from the throne of David. This is a pre-millennialism.

The pre-tribulation Rapture is part of the normative dispensational eschatology although it isn't essential to being a Dispensationalist. It is derived from a literal interpretation of scripture and is based on the distinction between Israel and the Church and the teaching regarding the immanency of the return of the Lord.

Dispensationalist checklist:

Are you a Dispensationalist? If you completely agree with the first item on the checklist below, you are a dispensationalist, because everything that follows flows naturally from a consistent, literal, plain and normal interpretation of scripture.

I agree with the three "Sine Qua Non" of Normative/Classical Dispensationalism:

-- I use a consistent, literal, face value method of interpretation and understanding the entire Word of God including prophecy. In other words—"God says what He means, and means what He says" so I can take what He says at face value.

__ I believe there is a distinction between the Nation of Israel and the Church (The Ekklesia of Christ)

__ I believe the underlying purpose of everything is for the Glory of God.

I also agree with most or all of the following:

__ The Premillennial view of the 2nd Coming of Christ which inaugurates the 1,000 year literal reign of the Messiah (Jesus Christ) with a rod of iron on the throne of David.

__The literal fulfillment of prophecy including Eschatology (the fulfillment of prophecies in the end times)

__The literal fulfillment of the promises in the covenants to the Nation of Israel

__ The Pre-trib rapture of the body of Christ

¹ Ryrie, Charles C. Dispensationalism. Pg 30. 2nd Ed. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007. Print

² Ibid, pg 34-35

³ Ibid, pg 48